



## **Higher Education as Social Sustainability in a Europe of Emergency Preparedness**

In a time when Europe faces heightened insecurity and increasing geopolitical pressures, higher education must be recognised as one of the key elements in emergency preparedness. Through the production of knowledge, higher education, as a public good, is at its core about fostering resilience, democracy, and solidarity — values that societies depend upon when confronted with various emergencies. For Nordic and Baltic students alike, safeguarding higher education means fostering a safe space for truthful discourse, thus securing the future of our communities and our capacity to withstand crises.

The question of national budgets is central to the current challenges. Higher education underpins long-term security by sustaining social trust, innovation, and civic engagement. Diverting resources away from higher education undermines the ability of societies to meet both immediate and future challenges. Governments in the Nordic and Baltic region must commit to protecting higher education budgets, ensuring that funding for research, innovation, and student support services remains secure even in times of economic and security strain.

The spread of misinformation as part of hybrid attacks represents one of the greatest challenges to democratic societies today. It is therefore essential that the role of higher education institutions as pillars of any democratic society is protected and strengthened. Through free, fact-based debate, education and the pursuit of knowledge, higher education equips students with critical thinking skills and the ability to identify manipulation. Furthermore, crackdowns and attacks on academia and academic institutions must be combatted. Academic freedom, research integrity, and open communication between institutions are essential tools in the collective effort to defend society against disinformation and strengthen public dialogue and trust.

At the same time, the resilience of higher education institutions themselves is under threat. During pandemics, wars, and climate emergencies, higher education institutions often face cuts, strained resources, or disrupted teaching and learning. Redirecting funding from education to defence has the potential to weaken the very institutions that allow societies to endure crises. Investment in digital learning infrastructure, continuity of teaching and studying

are vital to ensuring that higher education can continue to function in emergencies. Student-led solutions can be explored for the integration of preparedness and crisis-response training into elective curricula according to the regional context. Higher education institutions must be understood as part of the national preparedness system, with students recognised as active contributors to resilience and response during times of emergency.

Students themselves are among some of the most vulnerable groups in times of crisis, and their rights must be guaranteed. Emergency preparedness must ensure housing, financial support, and access to mental health services for students in need, while displaced and international students, as well as those with disabilities, require targeted measures to secure their right to accessible and safe education. Student organisations play an essential role in providing support and representing student voices, and they must be fully included in institutional, national, and international emergency planning and execution. Special care should be taken to include student representatives from autonomous regions in developing and executing national plans of action.

Mobility is a foundational aspect of resilience. Exchange and cross-border collaboration between students and institutions embody the very principles of European solidarity, but emergencies can severely disrupt Erasmus+ and other mobility programmes. Governments and higher education institutions must adopt emergency protocols to protect mobile students, guarantee recognition of credits and prior learning, and ensure that educational cooperation across borders can continue. By safeguarding mobility, we also safeguard mutual trust and the sharing of knowledge and best practices across the Nordic-Baltic region.

By strengthening higher education institutions, protecting student rights, and maintaining mobility, societies reinforce their ability to respond not only to military threats but to social, economic, and environmental ones as well. The Nordic Presidential Meeting affirms that students should be regarded as essential partners in building resilience, democracy, and social sustainability in Europe.

We therefore strongly encourage the Nordic Council, the NB8 cooperation structures, and Nordic and Baltic governments to actively involve students in the development of national and regional preparedness strategies

A resilient Europe can only be maintained through educated, empowered, and united communities.

Oslo, Norway

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